DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 295 HE 036 004

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TITLE Working the System: Student Activists' Characterizations of and Desired Communication with Higher Education Administrators.

PUB DATE 2003-00-00

NOTE 39p.

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Activism; Administrator Effectiveness; *Administrators; College Administration; *College Students; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Higher Education; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The perceptions of student activists about college administrators were studied. For purposes of the study, which was part of a larger exploration of student activism, activists were defined as college students who were both involved in and committed to social change. Also studied was the type of relationship student activists would like to have with university officials. Interviews were conducted with 24 student activists at 1 university. Data strongly support the idea that student activists perceive administrators as antagonists. Student activists often interpreted the opposition they experienced in their relations with administrators as representative of administrators' desire to disempower students through ignoring them or keeping crucial information from them. A few activists did recount positive experiences during which they through administrators had been supportive, and most of this support came in the form of availability for communication and access to institutional resources. Data also suggest that many students did have challenging the system as a primary purpose, but wished instead to participate fully in a society governed by the democratic principles in which they believed. Administrators could use the lessons suggested by the student activists in this study to engage with students who take social change seriously. (Contains 23 references.) (SLD)

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Working the System:
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College students who desire to positively affect their institutional and social environments have been characterized in many ways. They can be seen as a "nuisance" or "possibly even as detrimental to campus order and tranquility" (Astin, 1993, p. 48). However, they can also promote major changes to higher education institutions that many would see as positive (Rhoads, 1998a). In this paper, we provide an analysis of student activists' perceptions of higher education administrators, as well as their desired communication with those administrators. For the purposes of this study, we define student activists as college students who are both involved in and committed to social change. We consider the ways in which student activists work within, around, and against "the system" of higher education as represented by administrators.

Through our interviews with 24 student activists, we learned that they do not all perceive or interact with administrators in similar ways. Instead, we found that student activists characterized administrators in at least four different ways, and that these characterizations influenced both their actual and desired communication with administrators. An underlying purpose of this work is to consider the ways in which administrators and student activists might improve their communication processes to work together toward the betterment of higher education environments and society.

Literature

Recent scholarship has called on universities to be proactive in promoting social awareness and social justice (hooks, 1994; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998;

Tierney, 1999). Further scholarship has also urged those in higher education to value diversity both in the identities and ideas of participants (Chang, 2002; Ginsberg & Lennox, 1996; Kraemer, 1997). Student activists are working – often without reward or recognition – toward these ends.

Student activists' efforts can be useful in helping universities achieve their goals related to diversity and inclusivity. For example, Astin (1993) suggests that student participation in activism increases student awareness of other cultures. Through their participation, activists achieve a better understanding of different races, cultures, gender, and sexual orientation, thereby promoting a more inclusive environment in the university setting. Rhoads (1997) indicates that activists provide "powerful opportunities to bring campus groups together around common dialogues rooted in advancing our understanding of democracy and multiculturalism" (p. 518). However, both in the literature on student activism as well as in our interviews, we discovered that interaction and communication between students and administration was often problematic (Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Rhoads, 1998a; Rhoads, 1998b).

Communication between activists and administrators can take many forms and serve a variety of purposes. Many times universities are "accused of being too big and bureaucratic and of ignoring and alienating students" (Astin, Astin, Bayer, & Bisconti 1997, p. 724). The accessibility of administrators can make communication a difficult process for student activists. And while it may be difficult to meet with administrators, communication between administrators and student activists is necessary for effectively achieving an understanding of each group's needs (Boren, 2001; Hamrick, 1998; Levine & Hirsch, 1991; Rhoads, 1997).

In the cases where communication between activists and administrators is strained or lacking, these groups generally do not understand each other's purposes or potential functions

with the university. Rhoads (1998a) states, "student activism is not to be taken as a sign that the university is in agony, but instead may be seen as an example of a plurality of voices struggling to be heard" (p. 27). In most instances that is exactly the case—activists want others to pay attention to the issues they believe to be important. According to Hamrick (1998), "dissenting students offer alternate opinions, conclusions, and judgments, allowing a broader range of perspectives and enriching subsequent dialogue" (p. 457). Educating others regarding their cause to bring about change is one of the primary focuses. Many activists want to be heard and to have their causes taken seriously.

Yet, as Hamrick (1998) suggests, since many administrators' decisions are not publicly discussed, students may not believe that their perspectives are being considered. Further, they may not understand the rationale for administrators' decisions. Students may feel alienated from decision-making processes, especially when they involve decisions that directly affect their lives. In many situations, administrators may not agree with the views of student activists, but would still benefit from an open line of communication (Rhoads, 1998a). Indeed, such communication could ward off protest and negative publicity.

Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives

Qualitative methods allow for the exploration and rich description of experiences. This methodology is especially useful when not much is known about the particular phenomenon under study or when researchers desire to understand a given phenomenon holistically. "Because many aspects of the college experience do not divide neatly into discrete variables, qualitative methods of inquiry are the best suited for understanding the complex phenomena that come together to form the college experience" (Brown, Stevens, Troiano, & Schneider, 2002, p. 173). While a rich body of scholarship on student activism already exists, research specifically on the

study of communication processes among student activists and administrators is minimal. As such, the nature of this study lends itself to a qualitative approach and, more specifically, to grounded theory. In this section, we review some principles of grounded theory and then consider why grounded theory is appropriate for this particular study.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) posited that theories should be "grounded" in data from the field. In that same text, the authors coined the term "grounded theory" in reference to a particular method of theory construction. In a grounded theory approach, the researcher inductively observes aspects of life and then seeks to uncover patterns that may explain the phenomena of interest (Babbie, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe the process of grounded theory as a "systematic set of procedures" used to develop a grounded theory about the phenomenon. There is an "openness" to grounded theory not found in deductive methods. This openness does not mean the researcher has no preconceived notions or expectations about the phenomena, but rather that the analysis is not set up to confirm or disconfirm specific hypotheses (Babbie, 1998). Hence, the openness allows for more opportunity in discovering the unexpected.

Research in more recent years (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1994) further delineates the grounded theory process. Strauss and Corbin (1994), for example, state that a theory arrived at inductively (grounded theory) is articulated toward the end of the study. The theory can take the form of a narrative (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a visual picture (Morrow & Smith, 1995), or a series of hypotheses or propositions (Creswell, 1998; Creswell & Brown, 1992).

Data for grounded theory studies are often gathered from interviews. Interviews are conducted up until the "saturation point" of the categories. The saturation point reflects a time where information collected no longer adds insight into the situation being studied (Creswell, 1998). A category, according to Strauss and Corbin (1990), represents a unit of information

composed of events, happenings and instances. In research with college students, "interviewing in grounded theory has the specific intention of exploring students' experiences and placing them in context" (Brown, et. al, 2002, p. 175).

The research area of student activists and their communicative interactions with administrators allows for rich, descriptive data to be analyzed and patterns to be uncovered. Utilization of grounded theory in this study will better explain the desired communicative practices of student activists and administration in a system that has multiple and contested functions.

The data for this paper comes from a larger study investigating the questions: What motivates student activists to participate in activism? And: What are the current and ideal relationships between student activists and administrators? In this paper, we were interested in understanding how student activists crafted and understood their communication with administrators. More specifically, we focused on three research questions: 1) How do student activists view administrators? And 2) What types of communication do student activists desire to have with administrators?

The team for this project consists of three researchers in Higher Education and Communication. Each researcher has extensive experience with students, either as a faculty member or as a student affairs professional or both. After defining student activism for the purposes of this study, the first task was to identify student activists who met our definition: Student activism is more than just organizational involvement; instead, it implies involvement in and commitment to social change or social justice. Based on initial interviews with students who we had identified, we found other student activists through a snowball sampling technique. A member from the research team contacted each student activist and arranged for individual

interviews. All interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed. The initial interview protocol, consisting of open-ended questions related to our research questions, was revised after several interviews in order to allow researchers to probe further for more detailed data. Participants were asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire in addition to signing an informed consent form prior to beginning the interview.

During the Spring of 2002, a total of twenty-four interviews, each lasting between 30 minutes and two hours, were conducted. While all students interviewed currently attend a southern research university, they represent a wide variety of organizational affiliations. Of these twenty-four individuals, 19 were women and 5 were men. Seventeen identified as White, two identified as Black, one identified as Hispanic, one identified as multi-racial, and three constructed their own racial category or elected not to respond. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 25. They represented twenty different academic majors and five different political party affiliations.

Each researcher transcribed her interviews and then forwarded copies to team members. To strengthen trustworthiness of the findings, all three researchers conducted data analysis of the interviews individually and then collectively. Specifically, each researcher read through the interviews to code data related to how the participants interacted with administrators. Then, each researcher independently generated themes from that data. Following that process, we worked together to better characterize and substantiate overlapping themes.

Several limitations of the current study should be considered. First, this study incorporated a relatively small sample size (24 participants) and was conducted at one institution. Therefore, while findings may be useful for researchers and practitioners interested in understanding student activists' perceptions of their relationships with administrators, we must

caution that the findings are undoubtedly influenced by contextual variables that may or may not be similar to those at other institutions. It is also important to note that this institution was situated within one region. From our review of relevant literature, we believe that activists in other parts of the country may reflect different forms of activism.

Terminology

Before proceeding, we wish to explain our use of the terms "administration" and "system." Important to note when reviewing the themes presented below is that we did not define for our participants who or what we considered to constitute "the administration," nor did we use the term "system" in our interview protocol. Still it became clear to us that student activists were quite familiar with these terms and defined them in particular ways.

Student activists defined a variety of persons as administrators. While most participants responded to our questions by focusing on their perceptions of upper-level administration (including the provost and chancellor), others included in their definition facility services personnel, student organization advisors, and other administrative staff. While most made a clear distinction between faculty and administrators, the category of "administration" often represented anyone who held power within the university to enable student activists to accomplish their goals, or to prevent them from doing so.

Regarding the term "system," while most students used this term often, we came to understand that they did not have a firm delineation of what was in and out of "the system." In essence, they perceived administrators as being the persons who ran or, at least, perpetuated the system through their positions in the university. As a tentative definition of this term, we pose the following: "The system" refers to processes and functions associated with the university that

represent a political, social, and hierarchical structure that, to some extent, dictates participation and behavior.

Themes

The analysis process described above yielded several categories of data that informed our understandings of student activists' perceptions of administrators. Here we present the resulting themes in the following way. First, we consider the multiple ways that student activists characterized administrators. Second, we discuss what student activists told us about their desired communication with administrators.

Characterizations of Administrators

In any communication effort, the ways one perceives the recipient of the communication affect the interactions and outcomes desired. As such, we thought it important to illustrate how student activists characterize the administrators with whom they communicate. In this section, we categorize their perceptions into the following categories: 1) Gatekeepers in the System, 2) Antagonists and Enemies, 3) Supporters, and 4) Absentee Leaders.

Gatekeepers in the System

Student activists perceived that administrators, as gatekeepers of the current system, were in charge of maintaining stability and consistency in university processes and functions. Specifically, activists perceived that administrators had a great deal of power in the current system, and that they were interested in protecting that system. At the same time, they pointed out that administrators' options seemed constrained by the very system within which they functioned.

Student activists told us about the great deal of power that they perceived administrators to have. More concretely, activists perceived that administrators' positions in the university

allowed them to exercise substantial power over students' efforts. Two students told us about the simultaneous importance and tenuousness of their relationships with administrators. As John Paul explained:

> I think just knowing that you've got someone in a position of power who is in the administration high up on the power staff or whatever of the school, and they're behind you. I think that just gives you a real sense of security, for one thing, that what you're doing is not going to be shot down. And also that you've got financial backing to do what you want to do and the support of the administration, which is very, very important. Because if the administration is working against you, or just not helping you, it becomes that much more difficult for you to complete your tasks.

Katie described an occasion when an administrator approved a student proposal after substantial work on the part of a large group of student activists and their supporters. She spoke of her ambiguous feelings toward this administrator who had so much power within the system that she was trying to change. In Katie's words:

> It kind of made me feel bad for having to do all that work, and then just going in there and talking about it and getting a yes. Because, he's just in charge of everything, and "Yes, no." He just points his finger … It showed who holds the power here, and it was a White man. We had done all of this work, mostly women doing all of this work, and our [efforts] got approved by a man. That's what this is. . . . In a way, I felt sort of bad about him just saying, "OK you can have it." But at the same time, I felt good that we made him sort of give in to us.

Katie recognized that students working together were able to make substantial change, but perceived that one administrator's power to maintain the system was immense in comparison.

At the same time, several participants appreciated the constraints on administrators' abilities to work with them for change precisely because of the powerful positions they occupied within the system. Part of administrators' hesitancy in fully supporting activists' efforts was seemingly related to the constraints of the system itself and of the administrators within it. Several activists spoke of specific occasions when administrators detailed the reasons that certain efforts could not be undertaken. Fiona and Emma told us much the same story about their interactions with administrators. Here is Emma's description:

> I remember the first time that we were trying to [have a major campaign] on campus and we talked to [an administrator]…. It was so negative and it was the first time I had ever actually dealt one on one with somebody trying [when I was trying] to get a change happening on campus. . . . He was like, "We don't have the money. We don't have the power [or] work force to do this and it's a waste of time." It was very overwhelming, but it was also positive because you look at it now, and you just keep pushing little by little. We're seeing a lot of positive things happening.

As gatekeepers, student activists perceived that it is very difficult for administrators to change the system from within because of the role they played as agents of the system. As such, activists articulated that their jobs were not necessarily parallel to those of administrators. Rachel explained:

> The administration, they have a job to do, too. And their job often doesn't parallel our job. Their job is for order, and calmness, and for everyone to be happy. And I've been told that by administrators. I'm not making this up.

Laura shared a similar sentiment. She identified key allies in the administration, but also noticed that there were times and situations when administrators simply would not be effective because they were part of the system that activists were trying to change. She told us:

> If you're in the administration, there are certain things that you can't help with because that's just the nature of being in administration. It's like working within the system or working against the system. And you can't work against the system if you are in the system as an administrator. I think a major point is realizing that allies that are in the administration can't help you work against it. So there are things that you can't get them to help with. A lot of times, you want to work against the system.

Student activists pointed to a variety of instances when administrators could not help them achieve their goals, even if they wanted to. Instead, administrators had roles that were circumscribed by their positions as members of the larger university system.

Several student activists expressed a frustration that came from administrators' refusal to help them access the system that administrators were protecting. Specifically, they believed that administrators expected them to do all of the work in changing the system, since administrators were more invested in maintaining the current system than in changing it. As Ayn told us:

> They want us to do all the work. They want us to solve all the problems. And it's kind of like a tag game where it's like, "OK, here's our proposal." And they point out one thing wrong with it. And then we'll go and change that, and say, "OK, here's our proposal again. Are we going to do it?" And they'll keep on naming things wrong with it until, sometimes, equilibrium is reached where it actually happens. And it is happening right now. But it's an extremely slow process. Years.

Elizabeth articulated a similar story, "I don't know why they're so resistant to it or it just wasn't on their priority list. You know they weren't going to help us so we basically had to do everything ourselves." And Keith shared his frustrations as well:

> I have to go to [administrators] to prove to them that they can do a [particular program.] They are people who do this job that have a degree in it. They get paid to do it for 40 hours a week. I'm a student going to class. I have to develop a proposal, with no information, that they have, that they won't let us have, to show some way that this can work. Then they tell me, "Oh, it doesn't work and try again. Bring it back, I'll tell you when it's right." Like, "Pick a number – oh, that's not the right number." Then you find some way that's really feasible [and] they can no longer deny that this can happen.

When administrators hold a stake in maintaining the system in its current form, one way to accomplish this is to withhold information, resources, and expertise from those challenging the system, in this case, student activists. Many students articulated these similar perceptions of their interactions with administrators.

Regardless of the constraints that student activists acknowledged affected administrators' abilities to work with them, they expressed frustration with the roles that administrators played in maintaining and protecting the existing system, rather than working to change or improve it. Enrique felt that administrators were "sitting in their own little world," uneducated about larger social issues outside the university context. Holly believed that administrators were willing to support most student-initiated efforts, "as long as they think it will work within the university standards." Joe believed that although he wished administrators would be more open-minded, he recognizes that they are just "doing their jobs." And Ayn asserted that the administration wants "to keep things the way they are" and that "change is much more risky to them."

Jennifer also indicated that she understood the importance of administrators' role in upholding the current system. Yet, she asserted that she believed administrators and activists could find common ground on many issues, if only they would move beyond the desire to keep the system the way it is. In her words:

> I understand that [administrators] are looking out for what they perceive to be the interest for the university. . . . Just to be in that position, I don't think that you have a very activist outlook. But I think there are a lot of things that we can agree on, like I don't see any way that they can justify exploiting people, exploiting workers, denying people the right to organize… . and I do think that they think that there is a way to justify it. I think it is just resistance to anything new to change.

And Keith told us of a proposal he presented to the administration that he believed, if implemented, would save the university money. It was not met with the warm reception he hoped for. Instead, he was left with the impression that, "[This university] is about keeping the lid on. . . . It is about keeping everything like it is. No one is complaining. We are okay. And until anyone complains we just let it roll." Many activists perceived that one of the main roles of administrators was to ensure stability and continuity in the university, often at the expense of its improvement in terms of social justice or social change.

Antagonists and Enemies

Administrators' roles as agents of the system and as gatekeepers for that system often positioned them in opposition to student activists. As indicated above, student activists often are working to change the very system that administrators represent and attempt to uphold. Participants in this research told us that they "basically had to force administration" to implement one of their intitiatives (Elizabeth), that "I'm sure the administration is looking for any slip up on

our part to cut ties from the university" (Lynn), and that administrators are "a major blockade" (Enrique) or even the "enemy" (Atalanta). Other activists said that their efforts "embarrass" administrators (Ann), and that administrators have, at times, been "a thorn in our side" (Joe). Keith told us that:

> Activism is like judo....Judo is this notion that you use your enemies' power against [them]. If some guy runs at you, you kind of move yourself and throw him down on the ground. That's what we do. So, the administration is this big lumbering giant. We are faster than them.

Our data strongly supports the idea that student activists perceive administrators as antagonists.

Student activists often interpreted the opposition they experienced in their relations with administrators as representative of administrators' desire to disempower students through ignoring them or keeping crucial information from them. Repeatedly, student activists referred to administrators' unwillingness to listen such that students' views were given full consideration. Occasionally, this opposition took the form of student activists' inability to get a response from people on campus who could help them achieve their goals. John Paul conveys his frustration with a lack of response to his efforts to clean up an area of campus. He told us:

> I really wanted to clean up [this area], because it was gross. I talked to the environmental group that I was with about it, and they gave me a list of different people that I should call. And I tried to call them, and their secretary would talk to me, and she would say, "Well, he's not in right now, and I'll have him get back to you." And then he never does, and then you call back again, and then they say the same thing. And it's like, well, "Are you ever going to get back to me?" And then I would call Facility Services and ask them, "Can we have this and this and this?" And it's just so much red tape. They start saying,

> "What do you want that for? You're not allowed to do that. You can't clean up [that area]." But they don't do it either. It just gets really frustrating because it just feels like a lot of the time the administrators are against us, or feel like we're against them, too. And it makes sort of a clashing relationship, which I don't think needs to be the case. Because hopefully we all have the betterment of the school, and its effect on the greater community, at heart.

Securing a meeting with – or at least getting a response from – administrators, however, did not guarantee satisfactory communication between student activists and administrators. As Nick told us:

> I'm honestly quite disempowered by the administration, cause I feel like they listen to us. But then they say O.K. and then they stop. Like they don't know any way other than direct confrontation. . . . I don't know how to get them to *listen*.

Student activists did not necessarily want to continue oppositional and antagonistic relationships with administrators. Yet, they did not perceive that administrators were willing to go beyond those types of relationships in their interactions.

Student activists told us of several times when they perceived that administrators deliberately kept important information from them in an effort to disempower their activist efforts. That lack of information (or incorrect information) related both to specific incidents and to a delineation of the process for student involvement in decision-making. Atalanta told us of one interaction with a key administrator on campus that left her questioning the ethics or professionalism of that person. Specifically, she detailed the incorrect information that was given out (corroborated by other activists' recounting of the incident), and her public correction of the misinformation. She then reflected, "Either he didn't know his information or he was lying to us

but either way that just emphasized how he either didn't really care or he was wanting to push us off. And both ways that's not very nice." She added, "I don't see how you could with clear conscience do some of the things that administrators do."

Another way student activists perceived administrators as being antagonizers related to their inability to get clear, timely and honest information from them about relevant issues. Some activists complained of administrators being "distant" and like "politicians." For example, Elizabeth told us, "I guess things that I've encountered with them are slow. I guess it's like talking to a politician sometimes, they don't say anything when they talk to you." She described administrative actions around a particular event and indicated:

> I guess what I would personally like to see is not so much behind the scenes kind of quiet negotiations between stuff that people might like to hear about. . . . [Another decision] was very pushed along very quickly and no one really knew about it until it was already over. And then it was in the paper.

Joe described another event in a similar way, suggesting that administrators took advantage of student activists' absence from campus to push a controversial decision through. In Joe's words:

> It's so difficult to try to make change in a system that is dead set against it and that's dealing with administrators, dealing with fellow students even at times. . . . You fight and fight against something . . . because you fear that it is going to be detrimental to the campus, and then [administrators] turn around over the summer whenever you're not here and they [do] it in secret. . . . You know [then] that you have fallen short . . . in trying to activate them into doing something that you'd prefer.

Finally, Keith described a time when administrators appeared to listen to students and then disregarded their input without further conversation or explanation. He told us the following:

> We passed a resolution and [key administrators] were there. . . . so they heard all this and they saw the vote. It was unanimous for [a particular decision.] We mailed that on to them. So summer happens and we are out and I am on the internet one night and [see that the university made a different decision.] So we were all hopping mad cause they knew what we had done and then they did the opposite and we told them not to. And we eventually found out that they [made their decision] like two weeks after we passed this resolution. And we were looking at this like: Did they do this just to make us upset? What was the point of this? And I kind of got this notion that this was, [in] their mind, a compromise. We see it as just stonewalling.

He later told us, "We were just hitting a brick wall with them [about] this notion of 'We are your citizens, we have some say so.'"

Keith further indicated that an important piece of this antagonistic relationship was to withhold information about successes, as well as failures. He explained:

> They tell us it is really great and we really want to do it and we're really excited and wow it's wonderful and you kids are great – and then they don't do it. They never come out and say, "You know we are going to run you kids into the ground." You know they never tell us that but they never tell us . . . "You guys really beat us. You really made us look bad. We crunched the numbers and here's a copy of it cause you see here's how you did this and you see you beat us here. You see this is our weak spot so hit us there again." They are never going to come forth and talk about what was the deal. That's the key thing about the system. They will never come forward and tell you how you won.

Student activists wanted administrators to play an active role in maintaining and improving the campus. Additionally, some wanted administrators to acknowledge the larger role of higher

education in society. Current perceptions of many activists, however, were that administrators were not forthcoming in their communication efforts with students. And this led to antagonistic relationships between student activists and administrators.

Interestingly, not all student activists believed that having an antagonist to fuel their efforts or put "fire in the belly" was a bad thing. Indeed, Rachel and Helen shared their understandings that perhaps this was the appropriate relationship between student activists and administrators. As Helen articulated, "One of the principles of good politics is uniting against a common enemy. And that is kind of the role that the administration has played." For better or worse, the majority of student activists in our study experienced their relationships with administrators, at least in part, as antagonistic.

Supporters

While fewer in number, several student activists articulated that their experiences with administrators have been supportive instead of, or as well as, antagonistic. Most of this support came in the form of availability for communication and access to institutional resources.

Several students articulated that in their work, they found several administrators who were responsive to their attempts to communicate with them. Richard believed that they have a "pretty good working relationship" with the administration. And Ann told us:

> I have approached people in the administration who have given me a fair chance to state my case and listened to me very objectively and [were] open minded and heard me out, supported me, helped me anyway they could. . . . Some of them would just go out of their way to get me information that I requested, or just sit down and explain it to me or basically just work with me. And not just blow me off as a just a student who's wasting their time.

Other students spoke of high-level administrators' availability to meet with them and communicate with them on a regular basis. For example, Rose explained:

> All the students on [our board] can go to upper-level administrators and say, "OK. This is what is wrong. This is what we need. This is why we need it." And something will happen. All of them . . . they know all of us; they support all of our functions and stuff. So, I mean I can call them and they know who I am. . . . If I send them an email and say "OK. This is what we're having and we'd like you to attend," they're there.

Clearly, some student activists felt very connected to administrators and had found ways to access administrators in ways that were useful and supportive to them.

Related to accessibility, some students felt that in specific instances, administrators had been supportive of their efforts by providing them access to university resources. These included things like advertising, communication with faculty and administration, as well as the support experienced when university members attended the events of given student organizations. These supportive experiences were only possible to the extent that student activists believed they have access to administrators' time and attention. John Paul explained that in a particular effort in which he was involved, "We had some problems as to what exactly we were going to do and all that stuff, and some things did come up, but in general, I think we benefited largely from that alliance with administration." And Rose indicated that financial support for their events and organization was tied to administrative contact, and that was beneficial for both administrators and student activists in the following way.

> [Administrators' attendance at events] means a lot to us because before, you never saw administration. . . . Even when they funded our events, they never came to see "OK, this is where our money is going; this is why I need to keep doing it." They just wanted the

> bill. . . . But [new administrators] want to actually be involved with the process and meeting new students and things like that. So, I think that's very commendable in that they want to know what they're investing in and see "OK. Great. This here is worth investing in." So there won't be any argument as to whether next year [when we say] we need that [money] again, [administrators will say] "Fine, I'll give it to you. It's not a big deal." So they're really supportive of what we're trying to do.

Rose expressed her appreciation for administrative involvement in her organization and the events they sponsor, and felt that the communication fostered by that involvement led to better interactions between student activists and administrators.

Several student activists spoke of how important it was to have administrators who were both supportive and accessible to students. Laura emphatically stated her belief of the importance of having allies in the administration. In her words:

> The people in the administration, some are allies, some aren't. But the people who are allies are really, really important to keep as allies. . . . The administration is really important when thinking about strategy for activism, or changing something.

And, Rose indicated that a fear of unsupportive or inaccessible administrators sometimes inhibits students from voicing their opinions and becoming actively involved in campus activities and decision-making.

> I think sometimes students just aren't active on campus because they're scared of being turned down by administrators, that their ideas aren't going to be heard or [will be] thought to be stupid. . . . When the [administrator] came to [our event, students] were like "Oh, he's really personable. He's really nice." And most of the time when he meets you the first time, he'll remember your name the next time he meets you again. They're

> surprised by having [an administrator who is] touchable. After that first encounter, that kind of gives them the confidence [to think] "OK. Well maybe it's not so stupid anymore. Maybe I should get involved because the administrators do care."

While Rose's supportive experience with administrators was somewhat outlying when compared with other participants' experiences, a few other activists did point to times when they felt administrative support for their efforts to effect campus change.

Absentee Leaders

In considering students' perceptions about administrators, one theme that was articulated by many student activists in a variety of organizations was that they weren't entirely certain what administrators did. They expressed a sense that administrative work in a university must be important, but they couldn't articulate why, or what that work might be. Emma indicated that administrators must have "a lot of concerns" at the university; and Jennifer perceived that they seemed to turn up for photo opportunities, where there is "this wonderful activity that [the university] did and there is handshaking. But you don't really see them attending things that are in any way controversial."

Several activists felt that their current relationships with administrators were negatively affected because of the ambiguity and lack of clarity about administrators' roles and functions within the university. Atalanta told us:

> I have no idea what goes on with administrators, all the multitude of things that they have to deal with every day. And if I did know some of that, maybe I'd have more understanding for the thousands of things that they do, but there is no way to communicate that.

And Elizabeth said:

> With administration, I just have this image of them in my mind in their nice offices very, very busy doing all their whatever they do, I really don't know. I guess that's a start. What do they do? We don't really know. I don't. Maybe other people do…maybe if I knew that. If I was more informed about like what they had to do on an everyday basis. You know, what would work better with them as far as us communicating.

Elizabeth emphasized that she was even unclear as to who the administrators were who were making relevant decisions about campus. In her words, "I hate using the word 'they' . . . who are they?" And Keith told us that in his view, "[Administrators] lead sort of a shadowy life. They are there and then they are not. There is this illusion of access." Many students emphasized that although they believed administrators were likely important people who were very busy doing important things, the lack of communication between student activists (or students in general) and administrators led to tensions and ambiguity about the scope and functions of administrative leadership on campus.

Desired Communication Between Student Activists and Administrators

Having learned that student activists characterize administrators in a variety of ways, and that their perceptions of administrators were not always favorable, we thought it important to ask student activists about their idealized communication with administrators. We asked them to describe for us what communication processes would be in place between administrators and student activists in an ideal university. We present their responses using the following categories: 1) Accessibility: Where are you and what do you do?; 2) Campus change: (How) can we help?; 3) System change: Can we talk? As is clear from the data below, student activists' idealized relationships with administrators closely relate to the ways they characterize them.

Accessibility: Where are you and what do you do?

Student activists strongly expressed their desire to have access both to administrators themselves and to information about what administrators do within a larger university context and why they make the decisions they do. They seemed to believe that this type of regular and open access and dialogue would foster positive relationships with administrators whereby student-administrator collaborations could be formed to improve campus.

Some activists simply articulated that they wanted to be able to talk with administrators, and particularly upper-level administrators, on a regular or "as-needed" basis. Atalanta described her frustrations in trying to meet with an upper-level administrator about her concerns. She explained:

> I had a meeting with [an administrator] about other issues a little earlier this semester and he said make an appointment with him. Make an appointment with his secretary if I need to talk to him about anything. But A, he is busy a lot. B, when I called his secretary she seemed very hesitant to put me on his agenda as just a student that wanted to talk to him. And C, why should we have to go to administration to find out things? Why can't they come to us?

Enrique expressed a similar desire to have an easier method to access administrators' time and attention. He told us:

> We need some kind of open door policy, some kind of way where we can have access to people that we need to have access to without having to jump through all the hoops. . . . [When we work on something, we are told] "You need to meet with this person and you need to meet with this person and you need to meet with this person." You have to go through all these steps to meet the [top administrator]. But when we get to [an intermediary step, that administrator] doesn't want to meet with us, doesn't have the time

> to meet with us, can't pencil us in until a month from now. . . . It would be great if there were some kind of student administrative open door thing to where maybe just once a month [they] could meet with people who are interested in meeting with them and each person could be allotted 10 to 15 minutes to bring their concerns directly to the higher administration.

Elizabeth expressed her desire to have administrators be "more accessible and open to listening." She was not unduly harsh, however, in that she emphasized her understanding that "They have lots of stuff to do, just like we all do." Elizabeth suggested that administrators set aside one hour where students could come and talk with them.

John Paul took a different approach, emphasizing that it would be useful for the administrators to get out of their offices and visit with student organizations on a regular basis. He indicated:

> I think that one thing that would probably be really, really good for relations between administrators and activists particularly, would be for them to visit organizations. You know, come and talk to the [progressive student group], because that's where the people who are the vocal people about students' concerns are. And if they really want to know, then come and talk to us. I think people would be very, very excited about that. . . . A lot of the times, it feels like, you know, you write them an e-mail or you send them a letter, or you give them a call, and they never call you back, or they never get back to you. You start to get very frustrated and you feel helpless.

Laura's response to our question about idealized communication between administrators and student activists was telling in this regard as well. In her words:

> Administrators would be a lot more available for discussion and stuff like that with student activists. In an ideal world, students wouldn't have to get huge amounts of signatures to get attention on an issue. Administrators would not only be really openly available for discussion on different topics, but would also give and take. It's not like they would [say], "I think this is important, so what do you all think?" but [instead], "What do you all think is important?" And students would say, "I think this is important, but how does it affect you?" It would be more like an exchange instead. Here, it's a forcible exchange, but [I would like it to be] more of an open dialogue and exchange.

Another kind of accessibility student activists desired in their relationships with administrators was access to information about the function of administrators in higher education, and the rationales for their decisions within the constraints of their roles. Elizabeth explained that if she were more informed about "what they had to do on an everyday basis," communication and understanding would be improved. Atalanta expressed her skepticism about administrators' willingness to improve access in this manner, however, because she believed that level of openness went against the expectations related to the power relations between administrators and students. She told us that she thought communication between administrators and students would be improved:

> … if administrators were more honest with students about the things that go on. Like why do you do this? Why do you do that? Then maybe there could be a little more understanding. Because one of the ways you put people in the dark is to not educate us about what is going on. But that not only prevents [us] from knowing why [they] do things, but it prevents [us] from helping the situation. Like if an administrator does a certain thing and it's construed by an activist to be bad, we don't why they did that. We

might not understand that they had extenuating circumstances where they couldn't do anything that was seen as good by the activists.

Overall, student activists desired improved communication with administrators through increased accessibility to administrators' time as well as to knowledge about what they do and why they do it.

Campus Change: (How) Can We Help?

Several student activists expressed their understanding that in any social organization, there were constraints and both external and internal variables that affected the options for participants to consider in shaping their action. With this knowledge, they articulated a desire for administrators to clarify the roles and processes through which students could become involved with in shaping campus change. They wanted clear guidelines for how students could be involved in the change process, in large part because most believed that the system – while flawed – was necessary for the university's continued effectiveness. To the extent that the system was in line with their principles, they wished to participate in that system.

Many students told us of the ways that they have already adopted current systemic structures to participate in campus decision-making. For example, Joe explained:

> I'm lucky in that I am in the structure enough to where I can actually go and talk to these people on a regular basis if needs be. I'm on committees and I'm on this and that. Others that aren't within the power structure, as it were, just would have so much more difficult of a time of accomplishing this, [of] communicating [with administrators] even on basic levels. I think that working within the structure is important to deal with administrators because that's what they have to [do]. That's what they understand.

And Rose provided evidence about the ways in which she felt listened to and appreciated by administrators as she worked through system channels of communication.

We learned that this system is not accessible equally to all persons, though. Ann expressed her frustration with working within the system and advocated that administrators tell them how they need to work with the system to contribute to its improvement. She told us:

> A lot of times you come out and you just hear "no." And you ask some questions and they don't even want to deal with it. . . . And then we spend the next several months, years, trying to figure out what we need to do to get around it.

And Keith told us of one of the ways in which students were kept out of participation in campus decisions.

> You call a person and they don't know anything. They weren't at any of the negotiations. They didn't know about anything. They only have this line that they keep repeating to you about how much they care and all this. And you just [think], "OK, so is there someone else I can talk to that knows about it?" "Well, I don't know. I don't know who those people would be." "Well, I called this person and they told me you knew all this and you were answering all the questions." "Well, I don't know any of the answers."

Katie expressed a desire for a "clear line" or "a way of going about doing stuff." Elizabeth wanted to see less "behind the scenes kind of quiet negotiations," so that students could be involved in a way that made sense. Student activists are dedicated to improving society, to include their campus experiences. They expressed a desire to do this within the system, if only administrators could articulate to them how they could access that system and be heard within it.

System Change: Can We Talk?

As discussed above, student activists wanted to work within established systemic channels to improve their campus experiences as well as the effects that campus decisions were having on the larger society. However, at times, many participants in this research felt that the system itself was flawed in some way, and that their views could help to improve it. They sought more collaborative and, importantly, educational relationships with administrators such that they could share their knowledge with administrators at the same time as learning from them. In this way, student activists articulated a desire to work together to change the university system, what it represented, and its effects on the larger society.

As part of this process, several activists indicated their desire to have relationships with administrators that included administrators' willingness to learn from and about activists. Enrique told us that student activists often try to educate administrators about why they take a particular stand on world issues. His efforts are often frustrated, though, because

> . . . [administrators are] sitting in their own little world and may not even think about, you know, people in other parts of the world. . . . We as students feel we should take some sort of action. Granted that they have to act sort of as a buffer, because they can't go with the most extreme view they hear. But sometimes it's just frustrating when they do next to nothing or they end up doing basically nothing because they don't really like deal with the problem.

Fiona agreed that having additional information would help administrators understand activists' positions and, perhaps, make more informed decisions about campus policies. She wished that administrators would take the time to read the information that activist organizations provided them. She further articulated a challenge that she perceived in administrators' views of what students could contribute. She indicated:

> I think sometimes it feels like [administrators] feel that because they're experienced and older, and we're just students and we're idealists, [that] we don't know how the real world is. . . . And they don't want to listen to us. . . . I understand that wisdom does come with more experience, but that doesn't mean you can't learn from people that are younger than you. You can learn from anybody. . . . I think they need to try and keep that in mind.

Lynn expressed a similar frustration that administrators did not keep informed about student organizations and views, even when students went out of their way to ensure that administrators had access to that information. She explained:

> Administration needs to be informed. They need to be just as on top of the news as we are, and unfortunately they have a lot of other priorities. I think they need to be aware of the all the different types of organizations on campus as far as what ideas are being expressed here and what aren't. They see our name and they might laugh . . . but they have no idea what we do. We have everything laid out for them; we have a web site you can go to. It's just amazing that they don't take the time out of their schedule to meet us. There's no middle ground.

Student activists also expressed a desire to have administrators look hard at the system to evaluate whether they truly felt that all elements of it were worth upholding. As Joe cautioned:

> [Administrators] need to be the implementers of policy . . . they need to make sure that the wheels are turning. But, most importantly they need to be open to ideas of change, that you can make something better. If something's broken let's fix it. At times you know people get so conservative and so stodgy and so tradition-based that they are deftly afraid to change anything, even if they know that it would be for the better. So administrators, I'd warn them be careful about blindly following the status quo because it's dangerous.

Fiona urged administrators to challenge the current system, evaluating what was worth keeping, and what needed to be changed. And Lynn wished that administrators would "promise to work with us to try and make the campus a better place." She indicated that she would like them to sign something to that effect, such that students could then "hold them to it."

A few activists also indicated that they desired to dismantle the power hierarchies that keep administrators and students from working together to create positive change. They indicated that the university environment currently does not function as a democracy, and that they hoped administrators would consider working toward that goal. Christine and John Paul emphasized that it was incredibly important to have administrators become interested and involved in issues that student activists were trying to work on because of their longevity as members of the university system. At the same time, activists did not want administrators to "take over" the process of change. Nick explained:

> I think the administration should have the attitude of, "What can we do to help you?" instead of "This is what we're going to do to help you." . . . I think that's what the ideal administration would be here, to listen to the students and do what the students ask and not do what they think is best for the students or for whatever other reason they have.

And Keith perhaps most clearly articulated student activists' desires to have a clear place within their universities, in part as an experience in democracy.

> We want the university to be a democracy....These people are running [the university] like a corporation. If [communication] is one way – we disseminate information to you and you have no ability to affect us – that's not communication. If you have communication and you don't understand each other, that's not communication. . . . If you are lying down on the ground and I am standing on top of you and I'm talking to you,

> it's not communication. But [administrators] say, "Yeah, we're communicating." . . . I think it's entirely possible to communicate with them, but it has to be on an equal playing field. And this means they have to sacrifice some of their power and control and I don't think that they will do that yet. They are going to have to look at it a different way. They are going to have to say, "We are going to have to lose some control."

Keith asserts that in his view, it will take collaboration among various campus groups to increase their power in order to "approach [administrators] more as more of an equal."

Student activists' perspectives on the role that administrators played in "the system" were varied. However, Rachel's thoughts on this topic seemed to be particularly revealing and representative of a group of activists who recognized that there would inevitably be tension between student activists and administrators. As Rachel explained:

> [My interactions with administrators] have been disappointing at times. Because, you know, I'm an activist. And when you ask me to follow the system, I have a hard time following it because there's a reason I'm doing this, because the system doesn't work sometimes. And I understand that sometimes the system is what exists, and that's the built structure, and sometimes you have to follow that structure. But at the same time, the argument is that there is an internal problem that we need to fix.

Perhaps student activists' desire to communicate more directly with administrators stems from their desire to change – and improve upon – the current system. At the same time, most activists recognized the difficulty in asking powerful members of the system to initiate major change from within.

Conclusion

From our research, we learned that student activists perceived administrators as gatekeepers, antagonists, supporters, and absentee leaders. We also learned that our participants would like to have greater access to administrators, so that they can be an integral part of improving the university and its effects on society. Our findings indicate the following: While student activists characterize administrators in a variety of ways, some of those characterizations are more conducive to satisfying communication processes than are others. Further, administrators can take concrete steps to build relationships and improve communication with student activists on their campuses.

Through our interactions with student activists who participated in this study, we learned that many of these students' primary purpose was not to challenge the system, but rather to participate fully in a society governed by democratic principles in which they believed. The only way to accomplish this, they felt, was through ongoing communication with other system members, to include administrators. Our findings generally suggest that student activists were interested in increased interaction and communication with administrators. In this way, they thought their efforts to improve the university and the larger society could be strengthened, even if only through a better understanding of competing positions on a given topic. Student activists were interested in challenging the hierarchical nature of universities, as it impeded the full participation of all interested parties in participatory decision-making. Most felt entitled to participate in high-level decisions, as those decisions directly affected their lives as well as, at times, conflicted with their values. At the same time, they felt a responsibility to be as informed as possible before participating in those processes. What we can learn from their interpretations of the conditions in which they work for change can help administrators, student activists,

scholars, and others in higher education who are interested in strengthening effective communication with each other.

This research is important for several reasons. First, universities have as one of their core missions the development of students. Part of that development encompasses helping students learn to be participants in a democratic society by taking on leadership roles in their organizations and communities. While this research was limited to student activists, we believe that it has a wider significance for students who would not fit our definition. As Rose pointed out in her interview, if all students saw that the perspectives of their peers were taken seriously, more students would be likely to become active participants in campus and community life. This research can help administrators who wish to improve student involvement in decision-making processes that ultimately have the potential to improve students' development, especially in terms of civic participation.

Second, we believe that the work student activists do has the potential to help universities improve their campuses and, ultimately, improve their connection with and effects on wider communities. Participants in our study secured a permanent space for a Women's Center, invited factory workers from Bangladesh to speak about their working conditions, urged the university to join a group that protects the rights of workers, worked against privatization of the campus bookstore, and initiated a campaign to make campus a safer space for people regardless of their sexual orientation. Through various means, they educated their peers as well as university faculty and staff about these issues. For example, they collected petitions, wrote articles for various newspapers, and ran for student government. The energy and knowledge represented in this group of student activists could undoubtedly be used to help administrators ensure that

universities were serving all participants well, while also embracing policies and practices that acknowledged the role of universities in the larger society.

Our findings suggest the need for future research. For example, including more institutions, as well as institutions of varying demographics (i.e., public, private, size of enrollment, etc.) can increase understanding of this important student population. The inclusion of other institutions from different regional locations can add to this understanding as well. Yet another opportunity to expand the research would be to consider the perspectives of others involved in the process, including administrators. A comparison of administrators' perceptions to that of the student activists' perceptions should yield some useful and, likely, conflicting findings. Finally, the student activist/administrator relationship is not a linear one. Other communicative processes and relational aspects of the interactions should be studied for their affects on student activism.

If administrators are willing to engage with students who take social change as enacted in the university and larger society very seriously, they can use the lessons suggested by the student activists in this study to guide their efforts. In this way, higher education can benefit from the energy and knowledge of students as well as the wisdom and more experienced perspectives of higher education leaders.

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